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Within the heart's darkness: The role of emotions in Arendt's political thought

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Abstract

Interest in the political relevance of the emotions is growing rapidly. In light of this, Hannah Arendt's claim that the emotions are apolitical has come under renewed fire. But many critics have misunderstood her views on the relationship between individuals, emotions and the political. This paper addresses this issue by reconstructing the conceptual framework through which Arendt understands the emotions. Arendt often describes the heart – where the emotions reside – as a place of darkness. I begin by tracing this metaphor through her work to demonstrate that it is meant to convey the inherently uncertain nature of emotions rather than a devaluation of them. I proceed to challenge the notion that Arendt adopts the Enlightenment dichotomy between reason and emotion. In fact, she rejects both as a basis for politics. However, she does identify some constructive roles for the emotions. I argue that fear is intrinsically connected to courage – the principal political virtue – in Arendt's philosophy. In light of my discussion, I then reinterpret the role of compassion and pity in *On Revolution*, concluding that Arendt's insights can help us avoid the potential pitfalls of the contemporary project to recuperate the emotions in politics.

Keywords

Hannah Arendt, emotions, political agency, pity, courage, compassion

Introduction

There is an ongoing revolution against the sovereignty of reason in politics, and the emotions are at the barricades. The idea of reason, which Enlightenment thinkers celebrated as the supreme human faculty, has in the minds of many been tainted by

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its history of service to imperialists, chauvinists, and elitists (e.g. Foucault, 1982; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1972). Contemporary political philosophers have taken this opportunity to (re)assert the political relevance of the emotions (Ferry and Kingston, 2008). For example, Martha Nussbaum (2013) has argued that liberal democracies should prioritise the cultivation of certain emotions, such as love. With the growing popularity of such projects, Hannah Arendt's claim that the emotions are apolitical has, again, become a target of criticism. However, many critics have misunderstood the premise of Arendt's claim and drawn mistaken conclusions about her views on the relationship between individuals, emotions, and the political.

The confusion seems due in part to the tendency to select a narrow range of Arendt's oeuvre as the basis for interpretations of her views on emotions. The work that has received the most attention is *On Revolution* (Arendt, 2006 [1965]), in which Arendt appears to blame compassion and pity for the French Revolution's failure to establish a foundation for political liberty, and for the reign of terror that ensued. Among the most notable opponents of her analysis is George Kateb (1984), whose criticism continues to influence contemporary interpretations. More recently, commentators have found the basis for divergent analyses in Arendt's other works. Drawing primarily on *Men in Dark Times* (Arendt, 1995 [1968c]), Deborah Nelson (2006) has suggested that Arendt celebrates heartlessness because she believes painful experiences can bring us closer to reality. Volker Heins (2007) has argued to the contrary that *The Origins of Totalitarianism* (Arendt, 1979) shows that Arendt considers heartlessness a political pathology. None of these commentators appear to have examined *The Life of the Mind* (Arendt, 1978) in which Arendt offers her most detailed and systematic treatment of the emotions. Some of Arendt's lectures and essays elaborating her views on the emotions have also been overlooked. In this paper, I draw upon a broad range of Arendt's works to reconstruct the conceptual framework through which she understood the emotions and their relationship to politics. I contend that, although Arendt is deeply concerned about the dangers of using shared emotion as the foundation for political action, she sees a constructive role for the emotions in the development of individual political agency.

Arendt often describes the heart – where the emotions reside – as a place of darkness. I begin by tracing this metaphor through her work to demonstrate that it is meant to convey the inherently uncertain nature of emotions rather than a devaluation of them; I show how this understanding is related to Arendt's phenomenology of the inner life of humans. I proceed to challenge the notion that Arendt adopts the Enlightenment dichotomy between reason and emotion. In fact, she rejects both as a basis for politics. However, she does identify some constructive roles for the emotions. Fear, for instance, is intrinsically connected to courage – the principal political virtue – in Arendt's philosophy. In light of this, I reinterpret the role of compassion and pity in *On Revolution*, concluding that Arendt's insights can help us to avoid potential pitfalls in the project to recuperate the emotions in politics today.

Gazing into the darkness of the heart

The emotions, according to Arendt, are located within the darkness of the human heart. Some commentators have interpreted this as an extension of Arendt's call for a strict separation between the private and the public spheres (Berger, 2009). She famously warns against the modern tendency to transfer private issues into the public sphere – a space of intense brightness, where one appears to others through words and deeds and where only matters concerning the community as a whole ought to be discussed (Arendt, 1958: 38). Although Arendt sometimes refers to both the private sphere and the heart as places of darkness, she develops a politically significant distinction between them. These differences indicate that we cannot simply extend her normative claims about the private sphere to the heart and its emotions.

The idea of the heart as a place of darkness has been present in Arendt's work from the start of her scholarly career. We can trace it back to her doctoral dissertation, *Love and Saint Augustine*, first published in 1929. In this work, Arendt (1996: 26) describes the 'dark "abysses" of the human heart' that human eyes, 'delighted with light because their proper good is brightness, cannot penetrate'; only God can perceive its contents.¹ In this context, it is clear that the heart is not dark because someone has decided to leave the light off, but because there is no switch to turn on. Humans are simply unequipped to grasp the contents of their own hearts. Anticipating the later discussion of *On Revolution*, it is notable that this early assumption put Arendt on a collision course with Jean-Jacques Rousseau, who urged men to look into their hearts for the foundations of a just society (Makus, 2008; Rousseau, 1987: 29).

While Arendt attributes the notion of the heart's darkness to Augustine, it assumes a central role in her political writings. We find another relatively early reflection on the matter in *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, where Arendt (1979: 430) notes that a 'community of values' can allay the suspicions arising from the problem that we cannot truly know the heart of another. Lacking shared values, people seek certainty through other means. For example, in Nazi Germany, citizens sacrificed their privacy in exchange for the Gestapo's near-limitless authority to unmask dissidents in their midst.

Arendt returns to the dialectic between the darkness of the heart and the light of politics again in *The Human Condition*. There, she names the human capacity to make promises as a way out of the darkness:

Without being bound to the fulfilment of promises, we would never be able to keep our identities; we would be condemned to wander helpless and without direction in the darkness of each man's lonely heart, caught in its contradictions and equivocalities – a darkness which only the light shed over the public realm through the presence of others, who confirm the identity between the one who promises and the one who fulfils, can dispel. (Arendt, 1958: 237)

Despite the apparent antagonism between the heart and the public sphere implied by their metaphorical attributes, this statement indicates a complementary

relationship. The darkness of our hearts, according to Arendt, is not only cause for suspicion in relation to others, but also to ourselves; if we cannot truly know ourselves, we cannot fully trust ourselves either. There is no continuity or certainty in man's 'ever-changing moods and the radical subjectivism of his emotional life' (Arendt, 1958: 39; see also Arendt, 1978: 39). The only way to alleviate this uncertainty is through entering the public sphere where we can give and be held to account for promises. The intersubjectivity of the public permits things assume an 'objective' existence – a permanence and a definite shape lasting beyond subjective perception. Promises reduce the inherent unreliability of subjectivity by mooring individuals to an intersubjective reality, through identities composed of words and deeds rather than emotions and thoughts. This suggests that the uncertainty of the heart's darkness is part of what drives the individual towards the public sphere in the first place. However, Arendt (1958: 244), significantly, does not claim that the light of the public can eliminate the darkness of the heart; it only 'dispels' the uncertainty that springs from it.

But what makes the heart a place of darkness? The public realm is bright because individuals share it with others through word and deed. People enter this 'space of appearance' to act together with others. They participate as equals who pull no punches out of kindness or condescension, because they owe each other nothing but respect. Under these circumstances, reality – as determined by the common understanding of the actors – forces itself upon everyone (Arendt, 1958: 34, 38, 51, 176–177, 244). Plurality and language, then, are necessary conditions for light. However, the heart is characterised by its insularity. It leads a lonely existence isolated within the body of a single person. 'The intimacy of the heart, unlike the private household, has no objective tangible place in the world', writes Arendt (1958: 39). Thereby, she indicates a critical difference between the heart and the private; the private sphere exists between people. Although its 'plurality' is limited to family and close friends, and kinship and love bind it together, the private is still a place where one appears and speaks to others, giving it at least a degree of objectivity. In contrast, the heart's experiences are intrapersonal and radically subjective.²

The political problem with the heart's darkness is not that it drags personal issues into the public sphere. It is that its contents can never truly become public, no matter how much we discuss them. This notion contravenes the way we sometimes talk about emotions. The trope that some people 'wear their hearts on their sleeves' suggests that emotions can be easily read and that they are more honest than what we deliberately say or do. Yet, we know that emotional expressions can be deceptive. Though people may associate particular emotions with certain facial expressions, emotions can be present without them. When we say that someone is 'stone-faced', we do not necessarily assume that the person's expressionless face reflects an internal absence of emotion. We know people sometimes deliberately or habitually don an expressionless façade to conceal their 'real' emotions. In other cases, people's expressions can completely contradict their emotions. We might assume most people do not generally employ such tactics. But most of us have put on a pleasant smile at some point during a day when

we did not feel happy; cultural pressures and power relations make this second nature for many of us.

The wordlessness of emotion

As the metaphorical darkness of the heart indicates, our tendency to question and distrust the inner lives of others is part of the human condition. Although the darkness metaphor gestures at the problems of basing political action on emotion, it tells little of how Arendt understands the relationship between individuals and their emotions. Her last work, *The Life of the Mind*, offers additional clues. In this book, Arendt conceptualises the inner life of humans as two distinct parts: soul and mind. The soul, an innate part of human beings, passively registers bodily sensations – including the emotions and desires. Because the soul is innate – or, in contemporary parlance, ‘biologically hardwired’ – Arendt (1978: 34–35) conceives it as closely connected to the life process. The life process is the category of activities concerned with maintaining life, as opposed to making things or acting in the shared world (Arendt, 1958: 7). The explicit link between the emotions and the life process indicates Arendt’s ambivalence towards the emotions. While she sees constructive potential in them, Arendt (1978: 34) is deeply concerned about the modern tendency to subordinate politics to the life process and worries that the emotions could be used towards this end. In distinction to the soul, the mind actively engages in cognition – including thinking, willing, and judging. The mind’s activities rely on language. The soul, on the other hand, is pure sensational awareness, and, consequently, void of linguistic content.³ The emotions are, thus, wordless in their ‘unadulterated’ form.

Emotions may express themselves involuntarily through physical changes and sounds, which serve a communicative function, but which do not amount to words, much less dialogue (Arendt, 1978: 35). After all, visceral emotional reactions lack the formal elements of language, such as grammar and syntax.⁴ When Arendt (1978: 32) states that emotions ‘are no more *meant* to be shown in their unadulterated state than the inner organs by which we live’, she is referring to this absence of language and deliberation in emotional responses.⁵ I do not choose to blush when I am embarrassed; i.e. I do not *mean* to show my emotions in this ‘unadulterated state’ any more than I mean for my stomach to rumble when I am hungry. Both the flushing of the cheeks and my stomach rumbling are examples of what Arendt calls self-display, which she contrasts against self-presentation. Self-display is the passive exhibition of my qualities as a living creature, while self-presentation is the active and deliberate demonstration of myself as an individual (Arendt, 1978: 31, 36). Say, for example, I become angry because of something a friend has done, and I unleash a tirade of insults on the friend. When I first experience the anger, I might feel myself turn red and breathe quicker. This is my display of anger – an involuntary effect of my emotion. The tirade, however, is a ‘show of anger’; it is how I choose to *re-present* my subjective experience of anger to those around me. The word ‘unleash’ highlights the purposive element involved in this act and that I might have kept it ‘leashed’. The representation, thus, necessarily ‘adulterates’ the

emotion with a reflection on its meaning and appropriate object; it transforms the radically subjective and involuntary experience of emotion into an objective and deliberate act of communication.

The wordless immediacy of emotional experiences helps to further explain the heart's opacity in relation to ourselves. Emotions are radically subjective because they can only be sensed by the person in whose soul they materialise; I cannot point to my emotions the way I can point to a tree to show others what I see.⁶ However, the names and objects of emotion exist in the intersubjective world (Arendt, 1958: 300). I might, thus, know that I am experiencing *an* emotion, but *which* emotion it is and *what* caused it can be uncertain.

To illustrate, say I come across a news article about a rich and powerful person who is running for public office. Reading it, I experience several sensations – a lump in my stomach, hot cheeks, and a general feeling of unease – which I associate with various emotions, such as envy, resentment, and reluctant admiration. Depending on how I represent this experience, and to whom I represent it, I may come to different conclusions about what emotion I 'really' had. If I speak to a group of socialists, they might explain that I am resentful over the unjust distribution of power suggested by the article. Conversely, if I talk to libertarians, they may assert that I am actually envious or admiring of the wealthy person.

As Nussbaum (2013: 339–342) observes, the difference between these emotions is morally and politically significant. She argues that envy is a destructive emotion, which involves hostility towards a rival who has something I cannot have; whereas resentment is 'a moral emotion that involves a sense of injustice' and a desire for redress. Regardless of whether one agrees with Nussbaum's definitions, the example above highlights how attempts to transcend the radical subjectivity of emotional experience can transform the experience into something else. Furthermore, the venue in which I offer up my representation for intersubjective judgment determines the subsequent opportunities I have for action – in this case, perhaps, either social activism or self-improvement. Nevertheless, when I represent an emotional experience to others, they cannot confirm the emotion I experienced. They can only assess my representation, and, on this basis, we can collectively identify its name and object. The fact, then, remains that what is intersubjectively certain or real is not my emotion, but the representation I have provided. The heart's darkness, thus, stubbornly persists around the subjective emotion. This, as we shall see, is why pity is politically problematic.

What should we make of Arendt's seemingly archaic distinction between mind and soul? The mind–soul distinction draws on phenomenological observations about human experience. It highlights that we experience deliberate actions as different from emotional experiences and associated *re*-actions. Regardless of whether free will 'exists', we *do* sometimes experience ourselves as intentional beings. This is borne out by the fact that we often experience conflicts between our intentions and emotions. For instance, I may experience fear and feel the desire to cower but will myself to stand tall and show that I am brave. These experiences both have a rational basis. I am afraid because I am confronted with an object that rightly evokes fear. Without deliberate choice, i.e. 'unwillingly', I might find myself

cowering to avoid potential harm. However, I may instead will myself to stand tall because I want onlookers to judge me as courageous. So although both are rational responses, only the act of willing carries the weight of purpose. Thereby, the mind–soul distinction avoids positing an untenable dichotomy between emotion and reason. Furthermore, it permits us to make a morally and politically relevant distinction between emotional reactions and deliberate acts without presuming a universal human capacity for rationality. This is crucial to Arendt, since she was equally suspicious about ideas of human nature emphasising a common capacity for rationality as she was of those drawing on a capacity for a particular emotion (e.g. Arendt, 1995 [1968c]: 16).

There is, nevertheless, something objectionable in Arendt's idea that emotions cannot become part of the shared world. After all, we generally understand emotions not only as the feeling we have inside but also as some associated actions. We sometimes talk about love as a pure and hidden feeling. More often, though, we speak of the subjective feeling of love in conjunction with intersubjective acts we take to show our love. These acts are perhaps as much a part of our idea of love as the feeling. Love that persists for a long time without *any* action looks more like obsession. The project to completely divorce emotions from the actions related to them, therefore, seems misguided.

Still, Arendt is right that no demonstration of emotion can prove what a person truly feels inside, something which the usual way we talk about emotions often obscures. Although certain actions may relate to a particular emotion, the same action can be performed in the absence of the emotion. Within romantic relationships, there might be room for love to tirelessly demonstrate its authenticity. But we also know that, even between two people, a preoccupation with authenticity often results in suspicion and jealousy, which may spell the end of the relationship. In the political sphere – where people appear through word and deed – appearances are all that exist. There, the impossibility of confirming the authenticity of another person's feelings becomes an insoluble problem, the urgency of which multiplies with each person who enters the light of the public.

Reason contra emotion?

Arendt has been characterised as a standard-bearer of a tradition that celebrates the coldness of reason over the heat of passion, stretching back at least as far as the Enlightenment (Heins, 2007). These characterisations construct Arendt's views on the emotions as a convenient straw man, which incomprehensibly denies the role of emotions and motivations in fomenting political movements in particular, and politics in general (e.g. Wilkinson and Kleinman, 2016: 190). However, Arendt clearly rejects the reason–emotion dichotomy.⁷

Such misunderstandings of Arendt's views on the proper relationship between reason and emotion appear to stem, largely, from interpretations of *On Revolution*, in which she contrasts the sentimental feelings that drove the French revolutionaries against the political principles that inspired their American counterparts. Although some commentators have recently provided more nuanced accounts of

Arendt's analysis of emotion, there is still a tendency to overestimate her antipathy towards the emotions. For example, Johannes Lang (2015) has claimed that Arendt 'praised the American Founding Fathers for their aloof commitment to universal ideas and for their detached attitude to the suffering masses'. In fact, Arendt (2006 [1965]: 54, 85) repeatedly points out that the New World's material abundance meant that there were no suffering masses to evoke the compassion of the Fathers. She never says that the Fathers forced unruly feelings of compassion into submission with the power of reason. On the contrary, Arendt (2006 [1965]: 85–86) explicitly rejects the idea that the emotions could be brought under the control of rationality.

The modern glorification of rationality is misguided, according to Arendt (1958: 172): 'All that the giant computers prove is that the modern age was wrong to believe with Hobbes that rationality, in the sense of "reckoning with consequences," is the highest and most human of man's capacities'. Such rationality, she says, is 'a mere function of the life process itself, or, as Hume put it, a mere "slave of the passions"'. The relationship between reason and emotion, in Arendt's understanding, seems complementary. 'In order to respond reasonably one must first of all be "moved"', Arendt (1972: 161) observes, 'and the opposite of emotional is not "rational," whatever that may mean, but either the inability to be moved, usually a pathological phenomenon, or sentimentality, which is a perversion of feeling' – a perspective which resembles the current neuroscientific view that humans need emotions to be able to act (Damasio, 1994).

As mentioned, Arendt perceives efforts to idealise either the capacity for rationality or feeling as politically dangerous. She had seen first-hand how dangerous the idea of a true or superior human nature can be in the hands of ideologues, particularly when their audiences consist of individuals who have lost faith in other people and the world they have built together (Arendt, 1978: 478). For such people, the idea of an intrinsic nature that unites men of a particular race, nation or class is a seductive replacement for their loss. Whether this idea is based on shared reason or common emotion matters little:

The rationalism and sentimentalism of the eighteenth century are only two aspects of the same thing; both could lead equally to that enthusiastic excess in which individuals feel ties of brotherhood to all men. In any case this rationality and sentimentality were only psychological substitutes, localized in the realm of invisibility, for the loss of the common, visible world.⁸ (Arendt, 1995 [1968c]: 16)

These substitutes easily become the basis for exclusion and discrimination in political discourse. We develop formal and informal assessments and vocabularies that determine whether or not a person possesses the internal capacity in question, and, hence, whether we should recognise them as legitimate political participants.

The Soviets applied a brutal version of this technique against dissidents. Within the USSR, citizens with 'delusions of reformism' were diagnosed with schizophrenia and institutionalised for treatment (Bonnie, 2002). Nonconformist opinion became, in effect, a symptom of madness. And, naturally, the insane and

their views belong in the asylum, not in political discourse. This example seems extreme, but we find similar contemporary challenges to individuals' right to speak and act in public. The idea of the self-hating Jew, who holds feelings of aversion towards her own people, has long been used to delegitimise the political arguments of Jewish people who criticise other Jews or the state of Israel (Finlay, 2010). Take, for instance, this quote by the *Jerusalem Post* columnist Dan Uri:

Jews who have been *infected with the malady of self-hate* for a long time. In their blindness they are the first to adopt *the sick* equation that they sold to Palestinian Authority Chairman Yasser Arafat: freezing of settlements in return for the cessation of terrorism. (cited in Finlay, 2010 [emphasis added])

Of course, Arendt herself fell victim to similar attacks following her coverage of the Eichmann trial. By appealing to some implicit idea of what it means to be an authentic Jew, pundits such as Uri, and Arendt's accusers, avoid having to engage with the substance of their opponent's arguments.

According to the accusers, such unwelcome opinions are symptoms of medical disorder – a deviation from human nature. In the case of the self-hating Jew, there is a misdirected emotion; in the case of the schizophrenic dissident, there is a deficiency of reason. Consequently, they have no more right to be heard in political discourse than children. In the service of a politics of human nature, reason and emotion can be equally effective in excluding certain people from the discussion. They are indicative of a politics focused on ascertaining truth, in the form of an authentic human nature, rather than negotiating opinions.

There is no question that Arendt worries about the political abuses of emotion. Such abuses are evident in political history, but Arendt also identifies them within our tradition of political thought. She denounces Thomas Hobbes – along with Rousseau – for seeking solutions to political problems within the darkness of the heart, thereby, subjecting politics to the biological imperatives of the life process (Arendt, 1958: 299–300). By his own admission, Hobbes attempted to harness the human passions to create a government that functioned as an 'automaton that moves by springs and wheels as doth a watch' (cited in Arendt, 1958: 299). Such projects, I believe, are what Arendt (1978: 35) has in mind when she quotes Schelling in *The Life of the Mind*: 'The emotions are glorious when they stay in the depths, but not when they come forth into the day and wish to become of the essence and to rule'.

The political consequences of feeling

I have argued that Arendt sees emotion and reason as complementary. Recently, Nelson (2004, 2006) has gone a step further by suggesting that Arendt identifies a constructive role for at least some emotions. According to Nelson (2006), Arendt believes some emotional experiences help us to become aware of and face reality, while others 'anesthetise' us against reality through warm but worldless bonds of intimacy. The risk of worldlessness is particularly significant to members of pariah

communities, for whom the warmth of intimacy that comes with shared suffering is a welcome but dangerous escape from the world (Arendt, 1995 [1968c]: 12–13). To Arendt, the European Jews exemplified this tendency in their attempt to escape the hatred of the broader community by insulating themselves in ethnically homogenous enclaves of shared suffering and love in the period leading up to World War II. The further away the Jews removed themselves from the hatred they faced in the shared world, the easier it became for their persecutors to deprive them of their rights as citizens.

These are important insights, though, I think, Nelson misconstrues the role of pain. ‘Suffering is so much a part of [Arendt’s] notion of thinking’, Nelson (2004: 242) claims, ‘that only by feeling pain can one know that one loves the world properly’. Suffering is, indeed, a quintessentially worldly experience to Arendt, but not necessarily in the form of pain.⁹ When we enter the public sphere to act, we also ‘suffer’ the actions of others (Arendt, 1958: 111, 175). Opening ourselves up to suffering in this sense is, thus, integral to being in and understanding the world. In so doing, we will, of course, experience all sorts of emotions, including painful ones. This is partly why, as we shall see, Arendt conceives courage as indispensable for the political agent.

Arendt mentions other emotions that appear to be more explicitly constructive. Anger, for example, can reveal and expose the world (Arendt, 1995 [1968c]: 6). As Simon Swift (2011) has argued, this is a conviction Arendt applies in her own writings. Her response to Eric Voegelin’s critical review of *The Origins of Totalitarianism* suggests as much: ‘To describe the concentration camps *sine ira* [without anger] is not to be “objective,” but to condone them’ (Arendt, 1994 [1953]: 403). This appears to contradict Arendt’s repeated claims that emotions lack the words to manifest themselves deliberately. However, recall her distinction between a display and a show of emotion. To write ‘with anger’ seems to exemplify the latter since it involves reflection and representation; writing, in effect, transforms anger ‘into a shape to fit [it] for public appearance’ (Arendt, 1958: 50). Becoming aware that one is angry and allowing this anger to affect speech and action can help us to engage with the world in politically relevant ways. Arendt also mentions that fear, hope, and joy modulate our perception of and interaction with the world in significant ways. Joy, especially, has potentially great benefits: ‘Gladness, not sadness, is talkative, and truly human dialogue differs from mere talk or even discussion in that it is entirely permeated by pleasure in the other person and what he says’ (Arendt, 1995 [1968c]: 15). Talkative joy, then, is another example of when reflection has transformed a feeling into a show of emotion, i.e. a shape fit for ‘public appearance’.

Not all emotions can be easily transformed in this manner. Under some conditions, emotions can be overwhelming; as we have seen, Arendt (1995 [1968c]: 6, 13) associates intense emotions with alienation from the common world. Nevertheless, the intensity that comes with an overwhelming emotion is sometimes appropriate. Rage in the face of injustice is an example of this. Arendt distinguishes rage from anger; whereas the latter can be controlled, the former is characterised by a reactive explosiveness that seeks to destroy its object. Rage can be an expression of the

agents' powerlessness to redress an injustice politically (Arendt, 1972: 160–161); 'It is the mode in which impotence becomes active in its last stage of final despair' (Arendt, 2006 [1965]: 100). Although rage is anti-political in its rejection words and dialogue, it can still be a rational and appropriate response to an ongoing injustice, which requires a swift, forceful, and perhaps even violent response (Arendt, 1972: 161; 1979: 439).

Nelson and Swift both challenge the traditional interpretation of Arendt as someone who views the emotions in purely negative terms. But they overlook at least one crucial way emotions, according to Arendt, shape people as political agents. She recognises that some emotions serve an essential life-preserving purpose. Fear, for instance, preserves life by warning us about danger. In this role, fear epitomises the dark and passive nature that Arendt ascribes to the emotions in general. However, fear is also a precondition for the appearance of courage: 'The courageous man is not one whose soul lacks this emotion or who can overcome it once and for all, but one who has decided that fear is not what he wants to show' (Arendt, 1978: 36). We should not underestimate the significance of this. To Arendt (1958: 36), courage is not just one virtue among others; it is 'the political virtue par excellence'. It is the virtue that drives us to leave the safety of the private realm to venture into the public despite the suffering that await us there (Arendt, 1968a: 156). Courage is contingent on the idea of fear and the recognition of certain objects as fearful. We become courageous by publicly presenting ourselves as such, i.e. as someone who does not show fear when faced by a fearful object. When I will myself to stand tall in the face of danger, I present a show of courage that cancels out my reflex to cower – my display of fear. Whether I stand tall or cower, it is my act of self-presentation – how I *appear* in the world – that people will judge as courageous or cowardly. What differentiates fear from courage, thus, is not the subjective emotion, but rather what other people *imagine* that we experience and how they see us act, as well as how we imagine that others might judge our acts.

While Arendt does not describe how this movement from the subjective emotion of fear to the objective exercise of courage is possible, her ideas about imagination and common sense provide a possible explanation. She indicates such a connection in an early essay on understanding: '[W]e may call the faculty of imagination the gift of the "understanding heart." ... [I]magination is concerned with the particular darkness of the human heart and the peculiar density which surrounds everything that is real' (Arendt, 1994 [1954]: 322). The understanding heart seems to be what Arendt (1982: 43, 108) later terms 'enlarged mentality', that is, the capacity 'to think in the place of others'. She distinguishes this from empathy, which is the narrower experience of trying to feel as someone else. Enlarging one's mentality, by contrast, means imagining the feelings *and* thoughts of other people (Arendt, 1968b: 023609). She recognises that this capacity has its limits; it is contingent on what Arendt (1982: 170–173) calls *sensus communis* or common sense – the individual's ability to draw upon the implicit and explicit knowledge of her community to orient herself in the world. This ability is, obviously, context-dependent. For example, someone from an isolated tribe in New Guinea will have a strong

common sense in her community, but if she suddenly finds herself on the streets of Manhattan, it will be severely weakened.

Courage is, thus, inextricably linked to a common sense idea of what objects are fearful. To illustrate, say that I travel to the aforementioned New Guinean tribe, where there are huge but harmless spiders. I am terrified of spiders, and their harmlessness makes little difference. The tribespeople consider these spiders simply a nuisance. One night, during a fireside gathering, a spider crawls up on me. With effort, I remain calm, and slowly remove it. I avoid embarrassment, but the tribe's members think no more of it. Upon returning home, however, I tell my friends about the incident, and they praise me for my courage. They *imagine* that if they were me, they would also have been afraid, because they recognise large spiders as fearful. Similarly, in my friends' absence, I could imagine what action would appear courageous to them. By contrast, the tribe's members do not imagine that I have any reason to be afraid of the spiders (although I could perhaps explain it to them). What my friends view as a courageous act is, therefore, unremarkable to the tribe. Note that whether I actually experienced fear is irrelevant to my friends' judgment of me. What matters is that I reacted with a show of courage, rather than a display of fear, or even a show of cowardice.¹⁰

Despite its connection to fear, courage does not raise the suspicions that we have for the heart's darkness because courage is not an emotion but a form of appearance. The fact that courage manifests itself in the shared world through actions confirms that it is real. Hence, when Arendt says that imagination is concerned with the darkness of the human heart, she is probably referring the role of imagination in relating our subjective experiences to our common sense, thereby, providing a bridge between the heart and the public.

Re-reading the role of emotions in *On Revolution*

We find Arendt's most well-known and, I would argue, most frequently misunderstood analysis of emotion in *On Revolution* – specifically the chapter entitled 'The Social Question'. Drawing upon the preceding discussion, I will address some of these misunderstandings and provide a reinterpretation of the role of emotions in this work. In particular, I will respond to Kateb's objections to Arendt's analysis of compassion and pity in the French Revolution. These objections, though they are somewhat dated, continue to be influential (e.g. Gregory, 2008: 207; Newcomb, 2007).

In the chapter, Arendt argues that the French Revolution failed to establish political freedom because it was led astray by the social concerns of the suffering masses. Her idea of the social is controversial because it envelops much of what we consider the key questions facing politics today (Pitkin, 1998). I will leave this controversy aside. It is, however, useful to remember that one of the reasons Arendt tries to separate the social from the political was because, she believes, the former dresses private issues as matters of public concern. For instance, the labour movement was, in its early stages, concerned with the political question of gaining full rights of citizenship for its members. But once this had been achieved,

its constituent unions rapidly devolved into mere interest groups, which used a political vocabulary to serve its members' private wants and desire for more money, increased privileges, and improved social status (Arendt, 1958: 217–220).

Whatever existed of the private–public distinction in pre-revolutionary France was obliterated when the revolutionaries adopted compassion as their highest political virtue, Arendt (2006 [1965]: 65) claims. Inspired by Rousseau's writings, Robespierre saw compassion as a universal and natural basis for human relations and politics (Arendt, 2006 [1965]: 70; 1995 [1968c]: 14). 'The magic of compassion was that it opened the heart of the sufferer to the sufferings of others', Arendt (2006 [1965]: 71) writes, 'whereby it established and confirmed the "natural" bond between men which only the rich had lost'. Though this bond had been conceived as natural, it entailed the condemnation of an entire class, namely, 'the rich', who had allegedly lost the capacity for compassion.

Compassion, for Arendt (2006 [1965]: 70), means 'to be stricken with the suffering of someone else as though it were contagious'; i.e. to suffer with another person as a reflexive response to the suffering one perceives in them. As such, compassion is bounded, existing by virtue of a personal connection between individuals; and expressive, displaying itself through visceral reactions and eschewing discursive speech. When we feel compassion, the involuntary movements of emotion replace the words which could otherwise establish the discursive 'distance' needed for speech and action (Arendt, 2006 [1965]: 75–76). The duration of feeling is normally limited and permits the discursive distance to reassert itself eventually. This ability to alternate between the particular and the general is part of what gives human existence depth (Arendt, 1958: 71). However, a person whose life were consumed by compassion could not become political. Since such a person would be incapable of apprehending anything beyond the object of her compassion, she would truly be worldless. In Arendt's view, this person's life would be impoverished by her inability to become political. But her inability would not threaten politics as a sphere of collective action. On grounds of solidarity, she might be entitled to some kind of aid to enable her to enter the public sphere. However, a person who feels compassion when she encounters someone in pain is no worse for politics than a person who is sleeping – they are only temporarily removed from politics while they tend to another part of their lives.

Hence, when Arendt concludes that compassion is politically irrelevant, she is not suggesting that compassion is inherently bad for politics, as some critics have asserted (Kateb, 1984; Newcomb, 2007). Consistent with her phenomenological description of emotions in *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt simply observes that we *cannot* base political action on compassion because politics requires plurality and dialogue, and compassion is singular and wordless. Nevertheless, she also recognises that compassion is an intrinsic aspect of the human experience. A planet populated by beings devoid of compassion would be as unrecognisable as one inhabited by beings consumed by said emotion. Though we can assume that the latter planet would be unable to support a political sphere, there is no reason to think that the former could sustain politics more successfully.

How can compassion be apolitical and still have become the political basis for the French Revolution? Arendt's answer is that Robespierre and the revolutionaries deceived themselves when they thought they could make compassion a political virtue. For when compassion is brought out into the public sphere, it stops being an emotion. As we saw earlier, an emotion is, by definition, a radically subjective experience. Under the light of the public sphere, it morphs into a perversion of itself, a sentiment, which Arendt (2006 [1965]: 78) calls pity. Pity is 'to be sorry without being touched in the flesh' (Arendt, 2006 [1965]: 75). A sentiment is a feeling evoked by and directed at an abstract notion rather than an immediately perceived object. If I perceive a person who fits the notion's criteria, I assimilate her into it, effectively depriving her of individuality (Arendt, 2006 [1965]: 79). While this might involve some kind of imagination, it is distinct from imagination in the 'enlargement of mind' sense, that is, to think and feel in the place of someone else to understand their point of view. If conceiving the abstract notion of pity requires a sort of imagination, it does not involve understanding someone else. Rather, it entails the discovery and enjoyment of a particular feeling in oneself that is evoked by a certain category of people.¹¹ Arendt (2006 [1965]: 79) suggests as much: '[B]y virtue of being a sentiment, pity can be enjoyed for its own sake, and this will almost automatically lead to a glorification of its cause, which is the suffering of others'.

As such, there is an important political difference between compassion and pity, notwithstanding Kateb's (1984: 92–93) claim to the contrary. Of the two, only pity can appear in public: 'Pity, because it is not stricken in the flesh and keeps its sentimental distance, can succeed where compassion always will fail; it can reach out to the multitude and therefore, like solidarity, enter the market-place' (Arendt, 2006 [1965]: 79). However, it does not appear completely. Like courage, pity is linked to subjective experience. Unlike courage, pity is not something we can prove we possess through action alone. There may be certain actions associated with pity; but whatever these are, pity also comprises a subjective emotional experience, which cannot readily appear. The French revolutionaries developed a repertoire of pity – conspicuous crying at public events, calculated simplicity of dress, etc. – to demonstrate their pity to others. They quickly realised, however, that a person's show of pity could simply be an effort to mask the absence of feeling within (Reddy, 2001: 327). Their conception of pity's goodness derived from the idea that the subjective experience of pity is in itself good. Since the only evidence of this 'good' exists within the darkness of an individual's heart, we can never know for sure if a person has it.¹² We can see, then, that although pity has the form of a political virtue or principle, it also contains an essential subjective component, which is confined to the darkness of the heart. This component cannot strictly be shown to others, and, therefore, becomes an object of suspicion when someone attempts to demonstrate it.

The impossibility of affirming pity – or any other sentiment – in public is for Arendt a sufficient reason to relegate it from politics. However, the political dangers of pity are compounded by yet another problem. Pity necessitates discrimination between three groups. First, it discriminates between those who

are miserable and those who ought to pity them – between ‘the haves’ and ‘the have-nots’:

[Pity] does not look upon both fortune and misfortune, the strong and the weak, with an equal eye, without the presence of misfortune, pity could not exist, and it therefore has just as much vested interest in the existence of the unhappy as thirst for power has a vested interest in the existence of the weak. (Arendt, 2006 [1965]: 79)

It also discriminates between those who do, and those who do not, pity the miserable. As mentioned, the revolutionaries believed compassion was a natural human bond which ‘only the rich had lost’. When pity assumes the status of a political virtue, it becomes a matter of urgency to establish these distinctions publicly. The unvirtuous, whose lack of pity has corrupted the state, must be overcome lest their corruption spreads. But, as we have seen, the essence of pity is confined to the heart’s darkness and cannot appear in public. Effusive demonstrations of pity might mask different feelings. Pity, thus, demands of its political adherents the solution to an insoluble problem, namely: to unmask appearances, where appearances are all that exist. This was, nonetheless, the task that Robespierre and his followers faced. Their boundless pity resonated against the never-ending misery around them, multiplying the urgency of their task. It led them to suspect ‘intrigue and calumny, treachery and hypocrisy’ everywhere, trapping them in a spiral of violence, which killed thousands in pity’s name (Arendt, 2006 [1965]: 85, 88). For this reason, Arendt (2006 [1965]: 79) concludes, notoriously: ‘Pity, taken as the spring of virtue, has proved itself to possess a greater capacity for cruelty than cruelty itself’.

This claim has been severely criticised, most notably by Kateb. Apparently upset by what he perceives as an indictment of *both* compassion and pity, Kateb (1984: 95) responds: ‘That the perhaps most searching and original theorist of political horror in the twentieth century could, as if in self-forgetfulness, accuse compassion and pity as the sponsors of more cruelty than cruelty itself is bizarre, aberrant’. It is certainly not out of ‘self-forgetfulness’ that Arendt implicates pity as a ‘sponsor’ of cruelty, but for strong philosophical and political reasons, including pity’s lack of objective substance and structural tendency towards discrimination. She does not assert that pity is the only or the most significant cause of cruelty historically. In claiming that pity ‘has proved itself to possess a greater capacity for cruelty than cruelty itself’, she gives us no reason to take this to hold for any other instance than the French Revolution. Within the Revolution’s context, those labelled unvirtuous and ‘cruel’ were the people who failed to pity the miserable; their crime was callous passivity in the face of suffering. Meanwhile, the virtuous were those who pitied the masses; their crime was the zealous torture and murder of thousands of people. Can there be any question whose cruelty was greater?

Is Arendt then urging us to avoid compassion for fear of sliding into pity? The answer, clearly, is no. While we cannot *choose* whether or when we feel compassion in the face of suffering, we can guide it in different directions. One possibility is the sentiment of pity; the other is the principle of solidarity.¹³ Solidarity provides a

disinterested basis for recognising the plight of a group of people, and responding to their unmet needs, by acknowledging all community members as equal citizens (Arendt, 2006 [1965]: 79). Although compassion is not the only possible route to solidarity, it is an important one to Arendt – despite claims to the contrary (Christodoulidis and Schaap, 2012: 106). Indeed, given the potential for compassion to be corrupted as pity, awareness of the link between compassion and solidarity seems crucial if we want to avoid the dangers of the former. Within a community where solidarity is recognised as a praiseworthy political principle, the movement between compassion and solidarity could mirror that between fear and courage: First, I encounter and react to an object of compassion, such as a suffering person. I may have the urge to break down in compassionate tears, but, instead, I imagine what others in my community would perceive as an act of solidarity. On this basis, I act, and others who observe this act may then judge me as a person of solidarity.

Again, what differentiates courage and solidarity from pity is that they do not require people to infer what I feel. Though courage and solidarity may both originate in an encounter with an emotional object, their ‘essence’ lies in their appearance through action. Therefore, their reality can be affirmed only by public acts and never by appeal to private feeling. Once they have appeared in the light of the public sphere, their possible origins in the heart’s darkness becomes irrelevant. Nevertheless, in a world where humans had eliminated their emotions, courage and solidarity might never be discovered.

Conclusion

I have attempted to reconstruct the conceptual framework through which Arendt understands the emotions and their relationship to politics. Integral to this framework is the idea of the heart as a place of darkness – a metaphor for the radical subjectivity and uncertainty of emotions. According to Arendt, the emotions are wordless, involuntary sensations of the soul, distinct from the linguistic, deliberate activities of the mind. While this conception of emotion is excessively narrow, her attempt to differentiate between emotions and the actions that sometimes accompany them highlights that words and deeds cannot prove the presence of authentic emotion in politics. There is, however, a positive role for the emotions in Arendt’s political thought. Contrary to some claims, Arendt rejects the reason–emotion dichotomy. She understands reason and emotion as complementary capacities, and considers attempts to idealise the capacity for either politically dangerous. The emotions are also linked to politically relevant capacities, as demonstrated by the relationship between fear and the principal political virtue of courage. Although we must be capable of feeling and imagining fear to judge someone as courageous, we judge that person by her acts, not her feelings. Applying these insights, I reinterpreted the widely criticised discussion of compassion and pity in *On Revolution*. Arendt’s worries about pity as a political virtue are related to the problem of authenticity. Although pity takes the form of a public principle, it is firmly rooted in emotional experience. Therefore, the question of its authenticity

cannot be answered through public words and deeds. Pity, consequently, demands of its adherents the answer to an insoluble problem. And, as the French Revolution demonstrates, the endless road towards the answer is paved with violence and cruelty.

What does this mean for contemporary efforts to recover the emotions in politics? Understood as a complete theory of emotion, Arendt's conception is implausibly reductionist. It focuses narrowly on the visceral, biological experience and excludes other components of emotion, such as words, actions, and judgments. These all seem essential in light of contemporary sociological, historical, and philosophical research (Lupton, 1998; Reddy, 2001; Solomon, 2004). Judgments, especially, are central to current political theories of emotion (Ferry and Kingston, 2008). In fact, Arendt's own use of emotions suggests there is more to emotion than just feeling. She, herself, deliberately channelled anger into writing. While the words Arendt put to paper were not equivalent to her feeling, she seems to recognise them as an aspect of her anger. Elsewhere, she highlights the importance of storytelling in giving meaning to sorrow and grief (Arendt, 1958: 175; 1995 [1968c]: 104). And insofar as storytelling can give our sorrows and losses meaning, it seems to have a *meaningful* connection to these emotions.

Even if we insist that emotions consist of thoughts, words, actions, as well as feeling-states, Arendt's insights about the emotions in politics are significant. For whatever else an emotion is, it is also a feeling, which endows emotions with depth and is irreducible to words or deeds; it is part of what makes emotions significant. This insight seems lost on some contemporary theorists working to recuperate the emotions in politics. They generally emphasise the cognitive and the constructed aspects of emotions, which thus appear conveniently amenable to political reforms. On these grounds, it has been argued that we can instil citizens with particular emotions to improve our societies.

Nussbaum, for instance, contends that by teaching citizens to love equality, freedom, liberal democratic institutions, and other people, we could create a more just society. (Of course, she also emphasises that other capabilities, including reason, must complement love.) This proposal for emotional (re)education seems to reflect the sort of politically dangerous use of emotions that Arendt criticises. Indeed, Nussbaum's (2013: 15) explicit ambition is to pin political justice to an emotional foundation: '[A]ll of the core emotions that sustain a decent society have their roots in, or are forms of, love...' She says that love 'is what gives respect for humanity its life, making it more than a shell'. Like Hobbes and Rousseau, Nussbaum seeks to let the emotions 'become of the essence and to rule'. Her project might face a similar problem of unmasking inauthentic feelings as did the French Revolution. If love were considered an essential political virtue, failure to exhibit it would carry consequences, perhaps in the form of compulsory education or the stigma of abnormality. People would, thus, have an incentive to appear loving, much like the French revolutionaries learned to appear to have pity. Meanwhile, individuals who fail to appear loving could be model citizens. A person's love for her family could provide sufficient reason for her to respect other people,

democracy, and freedom, but her myopic love would still be unvirtuous. The French Revolution too saw people committed to liberty, fraternity, and equality in practice, whose inadequate exhibitions of pity led them to the guillotine.

The question of authenticity is, hence, at the centre of Nussbaum's politics of love and Robespierre's politics of pity. The greatest danger of this question is its boundlessness. The only distinction it recognises is that between truth and falsehood. We see this most clearly exemplified in cults, where people are ready to sacrifice their public, private, and inner lives to prove their authenticity and, with it, their right to belong. Where individual authenticity is of collective concern, the postmodern dictum 'everything is political' has become doctrine. It might be a sign of our times – an age of emotion perhaps – that this phrase is the mantra of many political activists. By reasserting Arendt's distinctions between the heart, the private, and the public in political discourse, we can protect the depth of the individual from collective colonisation – as we continue to search for the political relevance of the emotions.

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Notes

1. Decades later, Arendt (2006 [1965]: 87) reiterates this point: 'When we say that nobody but God can see (and, perhaps can bear to see) the nakedness of a human heart, "nobody" includes one's own self'.
2. Ben Berger (2009: 178) is thus mistaken in treating the problems of the heart's darkness as though these included the general issues of private life. In the passage he refers to, Arendt (2006 [1965]: 87) is specific that these 'problems' consist in the suspicions we have for the heart.
3. Quoting Aristotle, Arendt (1978: 34) says:

... the soul ... "came into being in the embryo without existing previously outside it, but the nous [mind] entered the soul from outside, thus granting to man a kind of activity which had no connection with the activities of the body." In other words, there are no sensations corresponding to mental activities; and the sensations of the psyche, of the soul, are actually feelings we sense with our bodily organs.

4. Arendt (2006 [1965]: 76) makes an analogous point, in less technical terms: 'Passion and compassion are not speechless, but their language consists in gestures and expressions of countenance rather than words'.
5. Earlier in *The Life of the Mind*, Arendt (1978: 31) remarks similarly: 'Unlike thoughts and ideas, feelings, passions and emotions can no more become part and parcel of the world of appearances than can our inner organs' – a clearly descriptive claim.
6. According to Arendt (1978: 40): 'Emotions... lack the chief worldly property of "standing still and remaining" at least long enough to be clearly perceived – and not merely sensed'.
7. Swift (2011) has also argued that Arendt challenges reason–emotion dichotomy, and we find evidence of this throughout her work (Arendt, 1958: 321; 1972: 161; 1979: 441). Generally, Arendt uses the terms 'rationality' and 'reason' interchangeably to refer to a presumed universal capacity for logical reasoning (cf. Arendt, 1958: 172, 283) – I follow this usage.
8. The 'loss of the common visible world' refers to the atomising individuality of mass society and the correlated disintegration of the public spaces in which people can meet and act together (Arendt, 1958: 59, 115).
9. Pain, Arendt (1958: 51) observes, 'actually deprives us of our feeling for reality'. The problem of pain turning people away from the world, towards introspection and muteness, is treated extensively in *The Human Condition* and elsewhere (Arendt, 1958: 50–51, 114–115, 309–310; 1995 [1968c]: 15–16).
10. This does not mean they must judge my act as courageous. They could consider it reckless or ignorant, rather than courageous as I had expected. The fact that my intention is irrelevant strengthens the point that it is my objective act rather than my subjective state of mind they judge.
11. Arendt (2006 [1965]: 78) actually frames the emergence of pity in the public sphere as a discovery: 'Compassion... was discovered and understood as an emotion or a sentiment, and the sentiment which corresponds to the passion of compassion is, of course, pity'.
12. This is likely why Arendt (2006 [1965]: 88) refers to pity as the 'ever-suspicious virtue'.
13. Arendt (2006 [1965]: 78) states: 'Pity may be the perversion of compassion, but its alternative is solidarity'. Since pity is the subject in the first clause – barring a grammatical error – the subject in the second clause 'its' must refer to pity – *pace* Aharony (2015: 212).

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